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Doctoring a jungle people

The primitive diseases of Belize

CRIQUE SARCO, Belize (UPI) — Every year volunteer medical teams from Amigos Internacionales travel from the United States to tiny, impoverished Belize where the care available is sporadic and the suffering chronic.

Dr. David Nichols, a dentist from Tyler, Texas, has had his share of frustrations during trips to the multiracial Central American democracy.

"You're not going down there to cure all the deformities in the country," he said. "You're going to get the pus out of their mouths."

Shipwrecked British seamen founded little Belize by accident in 1638 and the nation's progress from British colony to protectorate to independence has been marked by that same ad hoc, seat-of-the-pants quality.

Formerly British Honduras, Belize is smuggled against the Caribbean between Guatemala and the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. It never was the most remote nation in Central America, only the most inaccessible, thanks to a treacherous 190-mile offshore reef.

Until air travel, it was so tough getting to Belize that Aldous Huxley was moved to remark in 1934, "If the world had any ends, British Honduras would surely be one of them."

The nation scatters its population of 160,000 over a jungle about the size of New Hampshire, some 8,867 square miles. A third of the people cluster in Belize City, the nation's largest town and leading seaport, a metropolis with no traffic lights and a sewer system dependent on catfish.

The pathway that reaches from Texas to Belize is paved by philanthropy.

"In 1962 a group of men in Athens, Texas, formed an interdenominational philanthropic organization — Amigos Internacionales," said Dr. Kerfoot Walker, director of the Tyler-Smith County Health Department, which coordinates the expeditions. "They wanted to put their energies and money together to reach out to people in ways other than those practiced by their individual churches.

"In early 1970, we struck an agreement with the government of Belize promising them regular — but intermittent — dental and medical service."

Because medical supplies are hard to come by in Belize, the Amigos take along everything they can cajole from U.S. drug companies.

"Once when I went there the district hospital at Punta Gorda had only eight antibiotic tablets left," Walker said.

As Nichols put it, "Going on one of these medical missions is kind of like going to war."

Amigos sent 12 medics to Belize this year: Dr. George Skipworth, Columbus, Ga.; Nichols, Dr. Tom Cooper, Dr. Jim Holton, Dr. Ernest Brady, Dr. Andrew Quiroz, surgical nurse Loraine Jewett, nurse anesthetist Bill O'Neal, and medical assistants Debbie Morris and Carolyn Jones, all of Tyler; Dr. Mike Kennebrew, New Orleans; and medical assistant Cheryl Chapman, Dallas, who also is a UPI reporter.

The group split, Skipworth, Brady, Nichols, Morris, Jones and Chapman continuing to the jungle and Holton, Kennebrew, Quiroz, Cooper, O'Neal and Jewett staying at the hospital in Belize City.

The trip by dugout from Punta Gorda to the interior Mayan jungle village of Crique Sarco took five hours, a long time to sit motionless on a narrow wooden boat seat.

"Toledo District sometimes is called the forgotten district," said nurse Dorothy Wingard, a Mennonite health care worker in Crique Sarco. "It's the one furthest from the seat of government, and perhaps the most isolated."

The medics began work immediately as twilight fell.

Wingard accompanied Skipworth, Brady and Nichols to the thatched hut of the Choc family. Candalaria Choc was having problems in the final week of her ninth pregnancy, but she refused to leave her husband and eight children to get care.

Choc's husband, stricken with malaria, lay passive in his hammock. The dusty room stank of fever, and chickens trailed in and out through the door.

"If she doesn't want to go to hospital, nurse, I won't make her," the husband said. "If God wants her, she die. If He doesn't, she won't."

Some stories, like that of Stephanie Johnson, 3, a cripple, had happier endings.

Stephanie, daughter of village schoolteacher Genevieve Flores, had been playing outside their former home in Belize City when a heavy hurricane door propped against the house fell on her leg.

"The doctors there couldn't set it," Flores said. "They just put a cast on it the way it was."

The knee is growing away from the child's body at about a 30 degree angle. Arrangements will be made through Amigos to bring an orthopedic surgeon from the United States to Belize Hospital for the corrective surgery. Skipworth said, "and after that, she'll grow and run and play like any healthy child, like it never happened."

Nichols said most of the Indians' health problems are caused by diet, especially the popular highly sweetened coffee, which he said eventually kills its devotees.

"Because their (the Indians') teeth rot out early on, they want you to pull all those teeth. They don't realize that when they get rid of their teeth, they're cutting about 20 years off their lives, and this loss of teeth is a real factor in their short lifespan," he said. "It's just sugar, sugar, sugar, and once their teeth are gone, all they can eat are tortillas soaked in that old sweet coffee."

Clinic began shortly after daybreak with the village's most critically ill.

Initially, Skipworth suspected Martin Pop, 10, had Hansen's disease, commonly called leprosy. His parents were convinced the child was under a curse and had been treating him with charms.

Albina Choc, 36, was another suspected victim of Hansen's disease. Juan Isham Jr. came in with malaria; Timothy Bo, 7, had beefworms.

Most patients had parasites.

"If you could whip the enteric (intestinal) diseases, they'd be the healthiest people in the world," Wingard said.

But parasites pull down many of the children and adults so they succumb to dehydration or minor ailments.

"The people have a closed system of dealing with human waste, and as far as they're concerned, it works very well," Wingard said. "The pigs eat it. Then the villagers eat the pigs."

From Crique Sarco the medical team returned to the coast, to the Black Carib village of Barranco scattered back from the shoreline through groves of hibiscus, mango and sawgrass.

Barranco is a regular stop, and the word of the team's arrival is run up the path by children while the dugout holding the doctors and supplies still wallows in the chop several hundred yards off the dock.

The Black Caribs of Barranco, descendants of African slaves and human-eating Red Carib Indians, tend to gloss over suffering with cheerful carelessness. District nurse Vicki Nolberto hustles patients into noisy, laughing lines, trying to get and keep those with more serious complaints up front.

High blood pressure is endemic because of the Black Caribs' salty seafood diet.

The litany of complaints varied. Paula Poulieo, 82, who has lost one breast to cancer, had a heart murmur. Roberto Isabel complained of "sweet blood" and tested positive for diabetes, in addition to having parasites colonizing his feet.

Diseases rare in the United States turn up with oppressive regularity.

"I thought leprosy was dead and gone but it's not, not here," observed medical assistant Carolyn Smith. "It's a chronic, communicable disease, and we've seen it in several forms. I don't know what can be done for them (lepers) in the jungle."

Mostly, they die, as do the syphilitics, after years of misery.

Madaleine Sambulo, 85, bedridden from feet swollen to the size of buckets, smiled sweetly and toothlessly at Skipworth in her hut. Cataracts had blinded her; syphylis had deafened her, eaten away her nose, and collapsed the bones in her legs. She was partially paralyzed and open sores patterned her body. Her temper was sunny, her outlook optimistic, her chance of recovery zero.

Back at the clinic, the next patient wasn't in much better shape. Enrique Serrano's hernia demanded urgent care. In addition the 60-year-old man was diabetic, blind in one eye and had had his left leg broken at the hip socket. The hernia swelled visibly during examination and the doctors cut clinic short to make an emergency surgical run to the Punta Gorda hospital.

Serrano, in his best shirt and nautical cap, perched in the dugout's bow.

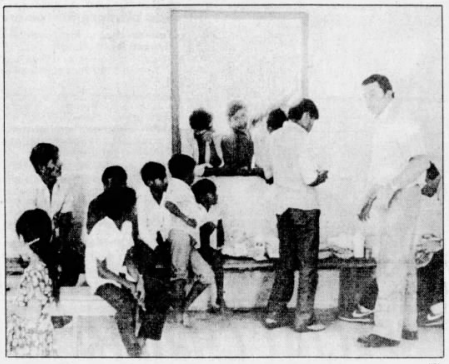
A storm hit just north of Barranco. For hours the dugout bucked northward along the coast, salt waves smashing over it, rain driving in sideways, all available tarps covering the precious medicines and everybody bailing. There were no life jackets, and because of the sharks, no need for them. Serrano sat erect, unflinching.

The storm blew inland at dusk as the battered dugout limped into the quay at Punta Gorda. Nichols touched Serrano on the shoulder to pass the elderly man with the mooring rope and Serrano fell backwards into the backpacks, out cold.

Bystanders and the doctors carried him two miles to the hospital and checked him in.

Perhaps he made it. Perhaps he did not.

"I don't feel like I finished what I started," Jones complained. "I want to know the end of the stories. I want to know if the man with the hernia lived, if they operated or just let him lie there. When we see patients in Tyler we see them until they're well. But we don't know — and won't know — what happened to the ones we treated on this trip."



UPI

Dr. George Skipworth, right, of Columbus, Ga., treats Mayan Indians in Belize

Jokes welcome at zany workout for executives

BY ANGUS PHILLIPS
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Ever have days when the world looks flat and dreary? Whole weeks like that? Months, you say?

Ever wake up with a cold knot in your stomach and think, "Darn it, I'm not going in the office today. They can put the paper out without me!"?

If so, and if you're a high-level employee of a corporation that has extra cash to dispose of, you might want to talk to the in-house powers-that-be about a little trip over to Corporate Adventure for one of their "wilderness labs." It could put that aggressive zing right back into your executive life.

That's right, Corporate Adventure. Did someone snicker in the back?

God. They like laughter at Corporate Adventure, as long as it's the right kind. Positive laughter. Supportive laughter. Laughter that creates a more energized, efficient and committed group and spawns goal-oriented success strategies. Laughter, in short, that brings results.

In fact, one of the first things your facilitator will ask you to do over at Corporate Adventure, once you sign in, is to make up a funny name for yourself. That's how Serious Sue and Myriad Maureen, Jumping Joe, Potato Chip, Silly Sandy, Crazy Carol and a couple others whose nicknames frankly have escaped this addled mind came to be balancing Ambiguous Angus in the air last week, bouncing him around like so much pizza dough in an exercise called "The Magic Carpet."

"Isn't this fun?" he thought, shutting his eyes and letting all those hands rock him in the brisk, autumn air.

Fun, indeed, but not fun without a purpose. The Magic Carpet was teaching him to trust his support staff, whether he knew it or not.

Corporate Adventure is Outward Bound for the soft and powerful. No serious risks here, of course. Nobody gets issued a Rambo knife and dropped on a deserted island. "We protect our clients against physical and psychological injury," said facilitator Janet W. Long.

Corporate Adventure's scheme is to take the brass hats from a big company out into the woods at the Madeira School in suburban Virginia, where they are taught to let their hair down, exorcise office stereotypes, touch each other, play. "get silly," and then as a group tackle ridiculous projects and take a few pretend risks in exercises that are "metaphors for professional challenges in the organizational arena," as Long puts it.

After a couple days of this, the exhausted bosses get to sit around for another day soberly assessing ways to apply their observations to improving performance in the workplace, which frankly sounds like a good day to call in sick.

Later, each exec might bring out his own "vertical support staff" for Phase 2, during which the boss sometimes gets jostled around by his inferiors. That's where the psychological protection comes in. "We don't want anyone walking out of here damaged," said Long.

That's good, because Corporate Adventure tackles problems, meaning taking out work groups that are on the verge of self-immolation and teaching them to play nice again.

Of course, our little crew was just a thrown-together demonstration group lacking the history of backstabbing that produces vitriolic fun with a more inbred bunch. I mean, we hadn't had time to cultivate any good hatreds.

But right in the middle of all this, if you can believe it, I noticed Potato Chip was breaking his Oreo cookies in half and licking the middle out.

Some executive!

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